

# Assemblages of care: why women with disordered eating are ambivalent to seek therapeutic care

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Gender Studies and Social Analysis (School of Social Sciences)  
The University of Adelaide



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# Abstract

This thesis critically examines why women with disordered eating are reluctant or resistant to seek professional health care. In exploring whether participants perceive their eating practices to be problematic, I analyse how health, illness and disorder are constantly negotiated processes understood through the multiple contexts of care and its intersections with postfeminism, neoliberalism and healthism. I argue that these political and cultural contexts represent a constellation of contemporary forces that together have created an environment where disordered eating practices can be culturally valued, allowing the women in this study to rationalise their practices as healthy lifestyle choices and embodied performances of self-care.

Employing a mixed methods approach (including ethnographic interviewing and observation, diary writing and psychological evaluation) with 28 women in metropolitan Adelaide, South Australia, this research is one of the few national or international studies to engage with people who deny they have disordered eating and/or do not actively seek professional help. Extending Foucauldian theories of self-discipline and individual responsibility I argue that Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *habitus* and Mol, Moser and Pols' (2008, 2010) concept of care provide a broader theoretical framework to understand the ways in which people with disordered eating embody and practise care as a form of 'healthism'. In this way their agency of choice enables them to engage in gendered bodywork and symbolic capital.

Key to my argument is how desire works in practices of care, and I draw on Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and Probyn's (1996, 2000) productive theories of desire to show that desire is not contained within individuals but is constantly articulated in social relations and spaces. It is through this

Deleuzian approach to desire that I reveal the ambivalence of care, and the ways in which disordered eating provides a safe space for both caring and not caring. In so doing I demonstrate how and why people rarely follow a linear trajectory from (distinct categories of) illness to recovery, and are instead propelled constantly back and forth in movements that connect them to the perceived safety of caring spaces. Desire is thus positioned as a rhizomatic framework for tracing the everyday enactments and multiple assemblages of care which intersect in participants' lives.

Examining experiences of disordered eating through the theoretical lens of care, this thesis provides new knowledge about how the notion of care is rationalised, experienced and performed in participants' lives. I argue that this understanding of care is at odds with assumed, clinical and therapeutic models of care, thus providing new insights into the low rates of help seeking amongst people with disordered eating and the high rates of relapse and therapeutic treatment failure. This work has significance to both social scientists and to health professionals working in the fields of disordered eating.



# Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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Connie Marguerite Musolino

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# Rationale for journal choice

The articles in this thesis were submitted to journals, the choice of which reflects the multidisciplinary approach of this research project and a central aim that its findings should reach academic audiences nationally and internationally across the social sciences and health sciences, as well as health professionals working in the field of eating disorders.

The first article in this thesis, entitled 'Disordered eating and choice in postfeminist spaces' was published in a special edition for *Outskirts: Feminisms along the edge*. The special edition, themed 'Responsibility', selected papers from the Australian Women and Gender Studies Association Conference held in Melbourne in June 2014, at which I presented the building blocks of this article. This is a leading Australian feminist and gender studies online journal produced through the School of Humanities at the University of Western Australia. *Outskirts* is a double-blind peer-reviewed journal with a 2010 ERA Ranking "A"<sup>1</sup>. *Outskirts* was an appropriate choice for disseminating findings from this study, which are based on women's experiences with disordered eating and how they engaged with gendered regimes of health, fitness and beauty. In addition, this article interrogates theories on choice, agency and empowerment, which feminist scholars have pioneered. The feedback I received on this article from reviewers in the field of feminist and gender studies was valuable to the article's theoretical development. Moreover, as an open access journal it is freely accessible to a broad readership.

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<sup>1</sup> Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) is an assessment system that evaluates the quality of the research conducted at Australian universities.

The second article in this thesis, entitled 'Healthy anorexia: The complexity of care in disordered eating', was published in *Social Science and Medicine*. This is a prestigious international journal with a high impact factor (2014: 2.890); it reaches a broad readership, including social scientists, health professionals and policy makers. The rigorous submission guidelines and peer reviewing process contributed to the strength of this article's methodology and theoretical arguments.

The third article in this thesis, entitled 'Positioning relapse and recovery through a cultural lens of desire: An Australian case study of disordered eating', has been submitted to the forthcoming Special Issue 'Anthropological Perspectives on Eating Disorders' in the journal *Transcultural Psychiatry*. The aim of the special edition is to reflect on what anthropologists have achieved methodologically and theoretically in the eating disorder field in the last decade. *Transcultural Psychiatry* draws from disciplines of psychiatric epidemiology, medical anthropology and cultural psychology, and publishes articles concerned with the social and cultural determinants of psychopathology and psychosocial treatments of a range of mental and behavioural problems in individuals, families and communities. Critical analysis of the field of psychiatry through a cultural lens, and considering how participants related and interacted with psychiatric diagnosis and labelling are central to this thesis, and therefore this journal was an appropriate forum to disseminate the research findings.

The final article in this thesis is entitled 'Developing shared understandings of recovery and care in the eating disorder therapeutic alliance' and has been accepted for publication in the *Journal of Eating Disorders*, which is the first open access, peer-reviewed journal publishing leading research in the clinical practice of eating disorders. This concluding article is based on the study's findings and makes recommendations to health professionals working in the field of eating disorders.

Dissemination through this journal has the potential to reach policy makers and service providers in Australia. As it is 'open access' it also has the potential to reach a wider audience outside of academia, including health professionals working across the field of eating disorders, as well as carers and people with disordered eating.